

Why inconsistent leadership is regarded as procedurally unfair: the importance of social self-esteem concerns

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Abstract

Three experimental studies examined to what extent leader's consistent use of procedures constitutes an important procedural fairness rule and influences people's reactions as a function of social self-esteem. In line with a recent claim that more attention should be devoted to different procedural fairness rules (Brockner, Ackerman, & Fairchild, 2001), the findings of Study 1 demonstrated that inconsistent leaders were evaluated as less procedurally fair and influenced feelings of uncertainty about oneself in ongoing interpersonal interactions. Study 2 showed that manipulating leader's consistency influenced people's procedural fairness judgments and willingness to replace the leader, but only among those low in social self-esteem (SSE). Finally, Study 3, using another consistency manipulation, demonstrated that variations in consistency made participants feel bad about themselves, particularly when they were low in SSE. These findings are discussed in light of research on relational models of justice and sociometer theory. Copyright © 2003 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Our daily social interactions are frequently characterized by fundamental concerns of fairness (Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, & Huo, 1997). For example, in organizations, one of the dominating themes of people's talk is often the issue whether they received the appropriate outcomes (i.e. distributive justice, Deutsch, 1985), and whether correct and fair procedures have been used in arriving at those outcomes (i.e. procedural justice). In the last two decades, considerable interest has been paid to the latter instance of justice in which people evaluate the fairness of used procedures (Tyler et al., 1997). Lind and Tyler (1988, p. 1) even propose that fairness judgments are influenced more strongly by procedures than by outcomes. In fact, at different levels of society an increasing demand for respectful and considerate treatment is echoed, and following relational models of justice, one way of assessing such quality of treatment is to evaluate the perceived fairness of used procedures.

In the present research, the effect of one specific rule of procedural fairness that has received relatively little attention will be examined (see Brockner, Ackerman, & Fairchild, 2001), that is, the consistency rule (Leventhal, 1980). In doing this, it will be examined whether inconsistent and unstable interpersonal relationships with authorities make people uncertain about themselves, and if this is the case, whether it is those individuals with low social self-esteem who will be particularly sensitive to variations of procedural fairness such as the consistency rule. Establishing such a

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moderating effect of social self-esteem will provide evidence that the consistency rule communicates information relevant to people's feelings and self in interpersonal relationships.

PROCEDURAL FAIRNESS: THE CONSISTENCY RULE

Since Thibaut & Walker's (1975) work on dispute resolution procedures (i.e. process control) and research on the 'voice-effect' by Folger (1977), an impressive number of experiments on procedural fairness have been conducted using the manipulation of voice (i.e. the opportunity to express one's opinion or not; see e.g. Brockner et al., 1998; Lind, Kanfer, & Earley, 1990; Van den Bos, 1999). Indeed, it appears that voice is now the most accepted and most frequently used manipulation of procedural fairness. The powerful implications of voice for enhancing procedural fairness cannot be denied as it is frequently shown that voice influences procedural fairness perceptions (e.g. McFarlin & Sweeney, 1996), decision making (e.g. Lind et al., 1990), goal setting (e.g. Earley & Lind, 1987) and outcome fairness (e.g. Van den Bos, Wilke, Lind, & Vermunt, 1998). However, in addition to voice, other variables exist that might drive procedural justice judgments. Leventhal (1980) suggested six procedural justice rules that people use to evaluate the fairness of allocation decisions: consistency, bias suppression, accuracy, correctability, representativeness, and ethicality. Thus, although other procedural variables can be identified, researchers have devoted most of their attention to voice and the extent to which it enables control over the process. In line with this, Brockner et al. (2001) argue: 'we know much more about the effects of, and moderating influences on, process control and decision control, [...] than we do about Leventhal et al. (1980) procedural elements of consistency, correctability and accuracy. Future efforts need to redress this imbalance' (p. 205).

One specific procedural rule that is of major importance within groups, organizations, and interpersonal relationships is the consistency rule: the rule that authorities use procedures consistently across people and over time (Leventhal, 1980). Indeed, the small amount of research done on this procedural rule suggests that it is very important (see Barrett-Howard & Tyler, 1986; Greenberg, 1986; Van den Bos, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1996). In fact, Greenberg (1986) asked middle managers to rate the importance of various procedural rules, and his findings showed that the consistency rule was rated as even more important than the possibility to have voice. As authorities within organizations are expected to treat and evaluate others in a consistent manner, its relationship with fairness clearly needs to be examined. In line with this, Leventhal (1980) notes that the consistency rule applies to situations where leaders define expectations and set standards for evaluations, and that 'once such standards are established, a sudden or marked deviation from them will be perceived as a violation of fair procedure' (p. 40). For these reasons, the focus of the present research will be on this instance of procedural fairness.

WHY DOES PROCEDURAL FAIRNESS MATTER?

Early theories explained people's desire for fair procedures from an instrumental perspective (Leventhal, 1980; Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Van den Bos, in press). That is, having, for example, the opportunity to voice one's opinion can reveal control over own outcomes, suggesting that procedures are important for *instrumental* reasons. However, relative to this instrumental viewpoint, recent theories such as the group-value model (Lind & Tyler, 1988) and the relational model of authority (Tyler & Lind, 1992) assume that people also consider *self-relevant* implications of the procedures enacted by the authority. More specifically, these models suggest that if leaders use fair procedures (e.g. providing

voice or acting in a consistent way), those procedures also convey a symbolic message that one is respected and valued by those leaders. Indeed, Lind and Tyler (1988) proposed that people involved in interpersonal relationships with an authority use procedures to find out information about their own self and identity, and, in addition, previous research has demonstrated that the use of fair procedures positively influences one's self-esteem and emotions (Koper, van Knippenberg, Bouhuijs, Vermunt, & Wilke, 1993; Schroth & Shah, 2000; Van den Bos, 2001). Furthermore, recently, Tyler (2001) explicitly noted that this type of relational information is focused 'on the individual', and the extent to which one has a positive standing in the interpersonal relationship with the relevant authority. As such, the key element of these relational models of justice is that fair procedures communicate feelings of inclusion and acceptance (Lind, 2001) in the ongoing interaction, feelings, which, in turn, will influence individuals' emotions and self-evaluations (Tyler & Smith, 1998).

The idea that an authority is able, via means of procedures, to influence people's self, identity, and emotions in interpersonal relationships is directly linked to assumptions made by a recently developed personal self-esteem theory, that is, sociometer theory (for a review see Leary & Baumeister, 2000). According to the sociometer hypothesis, the function of self-esteem is to monitor the degree to which one feels included by others, that is, the quality of one's interpersonal interactions with others. This implies that self-esteem has a communicative function signalling whether one is socially accepted by others or not (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). As a result, one will be less concerned and uncertain about own self-esteem the more *fixed and consistent* one perceives his or her interpersonal interactions with others to be, relative to perceived inconsistent relationships (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). The link with procedural fairness findings (as predicted by the group-value model) becomes very clear when Leary and Baumeister (2000, p. 20) argue that 'being accepted as a member of an organization affects state self-esteem not only because it involves current acceptance, but also because it implies that one is regarded as a prized group member with high relational value.'

Following from this, the argument is made in the present paper that those who are in need of relational appreciation, which contributes positively to self-esteem, will react particularly strongly to variations in procedures such as the consistency rule. Indeed, people with low self-esteem have been found to be sensitive toward social rejection and are very motivated to obtain approval from others (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Such an approach fits well with Brockner et al.'s (1998) argument that when it comes to procedural fairness effects 'relatively few studies have investigated the moderating role of theoretically derived, individual-difference variables.' (p. 395)¹ This person-situation approach (e.g. Mischel, 1973) suggests that the psychological effect of acting in a consistent (or inconsistent) manner depends on the extent to which people may perceive inconsistent social relationships as threatening to one's self-worth, that is, those with low self-esteem (see Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Thus, following this approach, it is suggested that the psychological effect of a procedure like consistency depends on how people interpret the situation and that such different interpretations may vary as a function of level of their *state social self-esteem* (see Heatherton & Polivy, 1991).

THE MODERATING EFFECT OF SOCIAL SELF-ESTEEM

To date, only two studies have addressed the moderating effect of self-esteem on procedural fairness. First, Brockner et al. (1998) showed that voice had different effects on people of varying levels of

¹In the present research, I will focus on state social self-esteem (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991) as a moderator of the consistency-effect, and therefore this variable can conceptually not be seen as an individual difference variable. However, because Brockner et al.'s (1998) conclusion was based on research examining the influence of self-esteem on the voice-effect, their line of reasoning regarding the influence of individual difference variables is very relevant to the purposes of the present research.

general self-esteem (e.g. items of the Rosenberg self-esteem scale): voice influenced a variety of dependent variables more among those high in self-esteem than among those low in self-esteem. However, a different moderating effect of self-esteem was found by Vermunt, van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, and Blaauw (2001). In a correlational design, they showed that procedural fairness influenced outcome fairness judgments most among people low in social self-esteem (SSE) than among those high in SSE (by means of the social self-esteem subscale; Heatherton & Polivy, 1991). These two studies thus illustrate that self-esteem may serve as a moderator of procedural fairness. However, neither study addressed the consistency rule—instead they only included measures of voice or a validated general organizational justice scale. Also, both studies made use of different self-esteem measures: a general self-esteem measure (Brockner et al., 1998) versus a state social self-esteem measure (Vermunt et al., 2001). In light of the aim of the present study to focus on state SSE, the Vermunt et al. (2001) study is particularly interesting. Why should SSE be so important in relationship to procedural fairness?

Because fair procedures are assumed to communicate information about relational appreciation in interpersonal relationships (Tyler, 2001; Tyler & Lind, 1992), it is clear that the *social dimension* of people's personal self-esteem needs to be addressed, that is, the social self-esteem subscale of Heatherton's and Polivy's State Self-Esteem Scale (SSES, 1991). This subscale measures the extent to which one feels socially accepted and attractive in interpersonal relationships. Providing further support for use of a social SE scale, Heatherton and Polivy (1991) also note that 'the differential sensitivity of the component factors suggests that researchers may examine the specific subscales of the SSES to gauge the effectiveness of experimental treatments' (p. 907). Translating this statement to the present study would indicate that if fair procedures communicate information relevant to the social self (Tyler, 2001), a measure assessing the social aspect of self-esteem is needed. Moreover, the social factor of the SSES correlates highly with public self-consciousness; a process that is closely related to people's concerns about their interpersonal relationship with the authority (i.e. reputational social self; Tyler, 2001; Tyler & Smith, 1999).

STUDY 1

To examine in greater detail the effect of leadership consistency, an initial study was conducted. This had two specific aims. The first was to add much needed evidence to the procedural fairness literature that the consistency rule constitutes an important procedural fairness variable (see Brockner et al., 2001). In doing this, the consistency rule was operationalized as directly as possible by staying close to Leventhal's definition that consistency reflects the tendency to maintain consistency in decisions and behaviours across situations and persons. Indeed, Sheppard and Lewicki (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada, 1984), for example, examined consistency as a procedure in the context of the way that consistent supervisors made allocation decisions. Thus, decision behaviour that changes across people and situations should be regarded as inconsistent, and following Barrett-Howard and Tyler (1986) constitutes a key procedural justice concern.

The second aim of the study was based on an assumption of sociometer theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Following this theory, it is argued that if people perceive their interactions with others as inconsistent, they will be more concerned about their self-esteem. Therefore, before examining directly the moderating effect of social self-esteem on procedures, it is necessary to actually measure if people experience more socially-determined uncertainty about themselves when being involved in an interpersonal interaction with an inconsistent authority.

The dependent variables of this study constituted procedural fairness judgments, feelings of uncertainty in the interpersonal relationship, and the willingness to replace the authority. This latter

variable was included because in leadership research it is suggested that if followers do not perceive leaders to match leadership prototypes or their expectations (cf. Cronshaw & Lord, 1987; Hogg, 2001) followers are inclined to select another leader (Van Vugt & De Cremer, 1999). Indeed, with respect to fairness expectations, prior research has demonstrated that people wish to replace leaders who allocate outcomes in unfair ways (e.g. Wit & Wilke, 1988). As such, it can be expected that if people perceive leader's procedures as unfair, they should also be more willing to replace the leader. This prediction is in line with Cropanzano and Ambrose's (2001) argument that distribution rules, which are classified as distributive justice (Deutsch, 1985), may also be used to assign what researchers have been calling procedures.

Method

Participants and Design

Forty undergraduate students at Maastricht University participated voluntarily in this first study. They were each paid 5 euros. The independent variable was leadership consistency (consistent vs. inconsistent).

Procedure

Upon arrival in the laboratory, participants were each placed in an experimental cubicle containing a table, a chair, some paper-and-pencil tests, and a computer. After participating in an unrelated study, they were asked to read the paper-and-pencil test. The total study lasted for 45 min.

In the paper-and-pencil test, participants were asked to imagine the following situation: 'You work in a company that produces and sells several types of electronic equipment. Due to your work specifics you need to collaborate quite often with your supervisor. During these collaborations, your supervisor often has to make decisions that are relevant to yours and his interests'.

This was followed by the manipulation of procedure. In the *inconsistent* procedure condition, participants read: 'Since you took up this position, you have noticed that your supervisor often takes decisions depending on the people and situations he is confronted with. In other words, he is very inconsistent in his decisions. Therefore, you find it difficult to understand the standards that he uses to make a decision.' In the *consistent* procedure condition, participants read: 'Since you took up this position, you have noticed that your supervisor often takes decisions in a consistent manner (i.e., he does not let himself be influenced by the situation at hand and the people he meets). In other words, he is very consistent in his decisions. Therefore, you do not find it difficult to understand the standards that he uses to make a decision.'

Then, the dependent measures of this study were administered. All questions were answered on 7-point scales (ranging from not at all [1] to very much so [7]). To check the effectiveness of the consistency manipulation, participants were asked to what extent they considered their supervisor to be a consistent person. Procedural fairness judgments were assessed by means of four items: 'To what extent do you consider your supervisor to be trustworthy', 'do you think your supervisor will make fair decisions', 'do you think your supervisor will act in just way', and 'do you trust your supervisor to make honest decisions?' These four items were combined to form one average procedural fairness score (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$). To measure whether the degree of leader's inconsistency influenced feelings of self-uncertainty in social interactions, participants were asked to what extent they would experience self-uncertainty in their relationship with their supervisor. Finally, participants were asked to what extent they were willing to replace this supervisor by another one.

Results

Manipulation Check

A one-way ANOVA on the manipulation check question revealed that participants in the consistent procedure condition evaluated their supervisor as being more consistent than those in the inconsistent procedure condition ($M_s = 6.50$ vs. 1.85 , $SD_s = 0.82$ and 0.81 ; respectively), $F(1, 38) = 321.58$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.89$.

Procedural Fairness Judgments

A one-way ANOVA on the average procedural fairness score revealed that participants in the consistent condition evaluated their supervisor as more procedurally fair than those in the inconsistent condition ($M_s = 5.20$ vs. 3.57 , $SD_s = 0.89$ and 1.33 ; respectively), $F(1, 38) = 20.49$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.35$.

Uncertainty in the Interpersonal Relationship

A one-way ANOVA on the uncertainty measure revealed that participants in the inconsistent condition felt more uncertain about themselves in their relationship with their supervisor than those in the consistent condition ($M_s = 4.35$ vs. 2.81 , $SD_s = 1.49$ and 1.24 ; respectively), $F(1, 39) = 12.26$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.24$.

Replacement of the Leader

A one-way ANOVA on the replacement score revealed that participants in the inconsistent condition were more willing to replace the leader than those in the consistent condition ($M_s = 4.90$ vs. 2.95 , $SD_s = 1.74$ and 1.28 ; respectively), $F(1, 39) = 16.69$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.30$.

STUDY 2

In line with expectations, the results showed that the consistency manipulation was successful and that it significantly influenced participants' procedural fairness judgments and willingness to replace the leader. In addition, it was found that inconsistent leaders did indeed make people feel more uncertain in the ongoing interpersonal interaction. Following from this finding, the suggestion could be made that inconsistent social interactions may influence people's perceptions of their own worth (i.e. feelings of uncertainty influence self-esteem; Greenier, Kernis, & Waschull, 1995). Therefore, following sociometer theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), it can now be predicted that manipulations of leader's consistency elicit concerns about social self-worth, allowing us to examine the moderating effect of social self-esteem (SSE). This test of SSE as a moderator was the primary objective of Study 2.

Another difference from Study 1 is that in Study 2 the social context will explicitly be characterized by a degree of interdependence. Following fairness heuristic theory (see Lind, 2001; Van den Bos & Lind, 2002), the relational component of procedures (influencing self and emotions) is expected to be

particularly important when people are concerned about potential problems with social interdependence and self-definition (referred to as the fundamental social dilemma by Lind, 2001). According to Lind (2001, p. 61), the reason for this is that interdependent relationships 'open the door to rejection and loss of identity', and therefore procedural fairness information becomes more important to confirm people's sense of self. One specific interdependence situation that has in common with procedural fairness its focus on relational concerns is a *social dilemma* (see Tyler & Dawes, 1993). Therefore, Study 2 will make use of a public good dilemma in which each individual group member will have an interdependent relationship with the group leader. This should increase the importance of procedural fairness (see also De Cremer, 2002a).

Method

Participants and Design

Seventy-three undergraduate students at Maastricht University participated voluntarily in the second study. They were each paid about 7 euros, and were assigned to a 2 (consistency: consistent vs. inconsistent) \times 2 (social self-esteem: high vs. low) between-subjects factorial design. Participants were randomly allocated to the consistency conditions.

Procedure

Participants arrived in groups of six at the laboratory, and each participant was placed in a separate experimental cubicle, containing a table, a chair and a computer.

After participating in an unrelated study, participants first filled out the Dutch translation (Vermunt & Shulman, 1996) of the 7-item state social self-esteem scale developed by Heatherton and Polivy (1991). This subscale includes items like: 'I worry how other people think about me'. These items were combined to form one average social self-esteem score (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.70$). Responses ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). A median split was used to classify participants as high or low in SSE (Median = 3.57, $SD = 0.57$; a higher score means low SSE [see Vermunt et al., 2001 for an interpretation of the SSE scores]). In addition, they also responded to a series of items that would prove to be of relevance to the consistency manipulation (see below).

After this, participants were introduced to the public good dilemma. Participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to examine collective decision-making. They were told that they would each receive an endowment of 30 Dutch Guilders (DFL; approximately 14 euros). They were free to contribute any amount ranging between 0 and 30 DFL to the group, and the total amount contributed by the group would be multiplied by two (= bonus) and then divided among the group members. Each point they kept for themselves would accrue to them. Of course, it would be tempting to contribute as little as possible, but if everyone would do this, then the benefits would be less.

Thereafter, it was explained that a leader, from within the group, would decide how to distribute the obtained bonus among the group members. Participants were then asked to read a note that they received at the beginning of the study. This note communicated to the participants whether they would be the group leader or a follower during the remainder of the study. After reading this note, participants typed in their respective role (i.e. participants knew that there would only be one leader).

After this, participants were told that the appointed leader would decide how to distribute the bonus (i.e. people could receive more or less than an equal share; something participants were led to believe could happen). To inform the group about their leader, they were told that the experimenter would send

them an email with the leader's average score on the list of items they filled out at the beginning of the study (these were items taken from the self-monitoring scale from Snyder & Gangestad, 1986, which had been adapted to the decision making context at hand). In line with Sheppard and Lewicki (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada, 1984) and Barrett-Howard and Tyler (1986), the consistency of the way the authority made decisions was manipulated. That is, participants were told that these items assessed the extent to which the leader would be someone who makes decisions in a rather consistent or inconsistent manner across people and situations. A low score would indicate that this leader would most probably exhibit consistent decision behaviour, whereas a high score would indicate that this leader would probably exhibit inconsistent decision behaviour. Therefore, in the *inconsistent* condition, the email message to the participants said that the leader had an average score of 8.9 on a 10-point scale, whereas in the *consistent* condition, the email message said that the leader had an average score of 4.9.

Then, the dependent measures of Study 2 were administered. Questions were answered on a 7-point scale (ranging from not at all [1] to very much so [7]). First, to assess the effectiveness of the consistency manipulation, participants were asked whether their leader was a consistent person (1 = yes, 2 = no). Second, judgments of procedural fairness, participants were asked three items: to what extent 'do you consider this leader to be trustworthy', 'do you think your supervisor will act in a fair way', and 'do you trust your supervisor to make honest decisions?' These items were combined to form one average procedural fairness score (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.71$). Finally, participants were asked to what extent they would like to replace the present leader by another leader.

Results

Manipulation Check

In the consistent leadership condition, 34 out of 35 participants responded yes (indicating that their leader was a consistent person), whereas in the inconsistent leadership condition 35 out of 38 participants answered no (indicating that their leader was not a consistent person). Thus, the consistency manipulation was successful.

Procedural Fairness Judgments

A 2 (Social self-esteem) \times 2 (consistency) ANOVA on the average procedural fairness score revealed, first of all, a significant main effect of consistency, $F(1, 69) = 7.12, p < 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.09$: participants in the inconsistent condition evaluated the leader as less procedurally fair than those in the consistent condition ($M_s = 3.82$ vs. $4.41, SD_s = 1.03$ and 0.84 ; respectively). A significant interaction effect also emerged, $F(1, 69) = 6.60, p < 0.05, \eta^2 = 0.09$ (see Table 1). As expected, the consistency effect was significant among participants with low SSE, $F(1, 71) = 12.25, p = 0.001$, but not among those with high SSE, $F(1, 71) < 1, ns$.

Replacement of the Leader

A 2 (social self-esteem) \times 2 (consistency) ANOVA on the replacement score revealed first of all, a significant main effect of consistency, $F(1, 69) = 12.26, p = 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.15$: participants in the inconsistent condition were more willing to replace the leader than those in the consistent condition

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of procedural fairness and replacement as a function of social self-esteem and consistency (Study 2)

Dependent variables	Consistency	Social self-esteem	
		Low	High
Fairness	Consistent	4.69 (0.82)	4.13 (0.81)
	Inconsistent	3.53 (1.11)	4.11 (0.87)
Replacement	Consistent	2.83 (0.94)	3.44 (1.23)
	Inconsistent	4.66 (1.28)	3.66 (1.28)

Note: Entries in bold are means on 7-point scales, with higher values indicating higher ratings of fairness and willingness to replace the leader, respectively; entries within parentheses are standard deviations.

($M_s = 4.16$ vs. 3.13 , $SD_s = 1.36$ and 1.16 ; respectively). Also a significant interaction effect emerged, $F(1, 69) = 7.46$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.10$ (see Table 1). As expected, this consistency effect was significant among participants with low SSE, $F(1, 71) = 18.04$, $p < 0.001$, but not among those with high SSE, $F(1, 71) < 1$, *ns*.

STUDY 3

As expected, findings from Study 2 indicate that leaders who were expected to make inconsistent decisions were evaluated as less procedurally fair than those who were expected to make decisions in a consistent way. Moreover, and more importantly, this consistency effect was found only among those who were low in SSE (i.e. who were in need of relational information; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). In this way, findings from Study 1 and 2 provide supportive evidence for the argument that consistency constitutes one aspect of procedural fairness and, following relational models of justice, indeed, seems to communicate self-relevant information in ongoing interpersonal interactions. However, before drawing more explicit and strong conclusions, several potential limitations need to be addressed.

First, in Study 1 and 2, consistency was manipulated by providing information concerning the consistency of the leader in terms of making decisions (see Barrett-Howard & Tyler, 1986; Sheppard & Lewicki, paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada, 1984, for the use of consistency in a decision-making context). Of course, using such manipulation may still leave us to wonder whether participants actually perceived such inconsistency as a deviation from an expected evaluative standard (see Leventhal, 1980). Therefore, in Study 3, consistency will be manipulated by making use of the Van den Bos et al. (1996) manipulation. In their research, Van den Bos et al. first identified the procedure that the authority would use (i.e. providing voice or no voice) to the participants, and thereafter informed them whether the authority provided voice or no voice in a consistent or inconsistent manner. Because this type of manipulation has the benefit that it is clear which standard the authority is expected to use (i.e. participants were told to expect to receive voice or no voice), a deviation from this standard, that is, sometimes giving voice and sometimes not, is likely to be perceived as a violation of a fair procedure (see Leventhal, 1980). Following this approach, in Study 3, participants were first informed that the leader was expected to be accurate and to take sufficient time before making a decision. This information should ensure that participants have a standard in mind, which would enable them to detect a possible violation of this standard (i.e. not being inaccurate).

Second, the findings of Study 2 indicate that those with low SSE used consistency information to determine their reactions, leading to more negative reactions in the case of an inconsistent leader. As such, it could be argued that unfair procedures (like inconsistency) must have communicated negative information about their relationship with the authority, and therefore made those with low SSE feel bad about themselves. This assumption is in line with recent research by Van den Bos and Miedema (2000), who showed that manipulations of procedural fairness in interpersonal relationships with an authority reveal the strongest effects on negative reactions (see also Van den Bos, 2001); although they did not assess the moderating effect of SSE. Moreover, this focus on the negative emotional side of procedural fairness is important, because negative feelings usually have the strongest consequences (see Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Folger & Cropanzano, 1998). Therefore, in Study 3, this assumption will be tested, by examining whether variations in consistency makes particularly those low in SSE feel bad about themselves.

Finally, in Study 1, it was assumed that if people in their interpersonal relationship with the authority feel uncertain by means of unfair procedures they should be more concerned about their self-esteem (see Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Therefore, the study first assessed the extent to which participants felt uncertain in this interpersonal relationship. Thus, the assessed feelings of uncertainty were socially determined (i.e. by the interpersonal relationship). However, it is also important to show that this measure (and associated assumption) cannot be equated with a 'general sense' of feeling uncertain about oneself, that is, a sense of feeling that does not specifically emerge from one's own interpersonal relationships (as argued in the present article).² To account for this difference, feelings of general self-uncertainty (which are not related to the experience of the interpersonal relationship) will also be measured, and used as a covariate in the main analysis to make sure that the presented line of reasoning about the moderating effect of SSE is not related to this more general type of uncertainty.

Method

Participants and Design

Fifty-one undergraduate students at Maastricht University participated voluntarily (five participants were deleted from the analyses, because they were suspicious of the study). They were each paid 2 euros, and were assigned to a 2 (consistency: consistent vs. inconsistent) \times 2 (social self-esteem: high vs. low) between-subjects factorial design. Participants were randomly allocated to the consistency conditions.

Procedure

Participants were approached by a research assistant and asked whether they were willing to participate in a study. If they agreed, participants were given a written introduction to the study and were told that after reading all the necessary information (as described in the written introduction) they would move on to the following part of the study (where they would be interacting with the authority who was described in the written introduction).

As in Study 2, participants first filled out the same 7-item social self-esteem scale (Vermunt & Shulman, 1996). These items were combined to form one average social self-esteem score (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$). Responses ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). A median

²I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising the issue of self-uncertainty.

split was used to classify participants as high or low in SSE (Median = 2.57, $SD = 0.73$; a higher score means low SSE). Also, to assess general feelings of self-uncertainty, which are not related to the social context of an interpersonal interaction, participants were asked to respond to two statements (taken from Oleson, Poehlmann, Yost, Lynch, & Arkin, 2000): 'I often wish that I felt more certain of my strengths and weaknesses', and 'Sometimes I feel that I don't know why I have succeeded at something'. These items were combined to form one average self-uncertainty score ($r = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$).

After filling out the SSE and self-uncertainty items, participants were told that in a few moments (after reading the written introduction) they would first participate in a decision task in which they could earn financial resources. These resources were important as they were to be used in a subsequent task in which they would participate together with some others (i.e. more financial resources would be helpful to each participant in this subsequent group task). It was said that to distribute these resources during the first decision task a leader would be appointed. To make it clear how this leader could operate, participants were informed that this leader was able to make use of a certain decision-making procedure. This procedure constituted the leader accurately checking each participant's performance during the decision task and taking sufficient time to make a good distribution decision.

After this, the consistency manipulation was introduced. Participants were first told that this leader had already functioned as an allocator of resources in other studies. In half of the conditions, participants were then informed that during those previous studies this leader always used the described procedure. That is, this leader always checked people's responses accurately and took sufficient time to determine his decision (i.e. *consistency* condition). In the other half of the conditions, participants were then informed that during these studies this leader did not always make use of the described procedure. That is, sometimes this leader checked people's responses accurately and took sufficient time to determine his decision and sometimes he did not (i.e. *inconsistency* condition). Thereafter, participants were told again that this leader would evaluate their performances during the first decision task.

Then, the dependent measures of Study 3 were administered. Questions were answered on a 7-point scale (ranging from not at all [1] to very much so [7]). First, to assess the effectiveness of the consistency manipulation, participants were asked whether the leader consistently followed the same procedure. Second, to measure participant's perception of leader's general fairness, they were asked to what extent they considered this leader to be fair. Finally, participants were asked how bad they would feel about themselves in their interaction with this leader.

Results

Manipulation Check

A 2 (social self-esteem) \times 2 (consistency) ANOVA on the manipulation check question revealed only a significant main effect of consistency, $F(1, 42) = 160.75$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.79$, showing that the leader in the consistency condition was perceived to be more consistent in following the same procedure than the leader in the inconsistency condition ($M_s = 6.31$ vs. 2.27, $SD_s = 0.83$ and 1.21; respectively). Thus, the consistency manipulation was successful.

In addition, to check whether the consistency manipulation was really influencing perceptions of general fairness, a 2 \times 2 ANOVA was conducted on the perceived fairness question, revealing a significant main effect of consistency, $F(1, 42) = 45.43$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.52$. This analysis showed that a consistent leader was indeed perceived to be fairer than an inconsistent leader ($M_s = 5.69$ vs. 2.92, $SD_s = 1.12$ and 1.45; respectively).

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of negative emotion as a function of social self-esteem and consistency (Study 3)

Dependent variables	Consistency	Social self-esteem	
		Low	High
Negative Emotion	Consistent	2.76 (1.06)	3.28 (1.26)
	Inconsistent	4.55 (0.84)	3.48 (1.55)

Note: Entries in bold are means on 7-point scales, with higher values indicating higher ratings of feeling bad about oneself; entries within parentheses are standard deviations.

Negative Self-evaluation

A 2×2 ANCOVA on the negative self-evaluation score, with the average self-uncertainty score as covariate, revealed a significant main effect of consistency, $F(1, 41) = 6.41$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.14$: participants in the inconsistent condition felt more bad about themselves than those in the consistent condition ($M_s = 4.02$ vs. 3.02 , $SD_s = 1.19$ and 1.39 ; respectively). Also, a significant interaction effect emerged, $F(1, 41) = 3.77$, $p = 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$ (see Table 2). As expected, the consistency effect was significant among participants with low SSE, $F(1, 41) = 8.03$, $p < 0.01$, but not among those with high SSE, $F(1, 41) < 1$, *ns*.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, the present results show that leader's consistency may affect people's reactions to his or her leadership. In line with a recent statement of Brockner et al. (2001), it was noted that the effect of consistency in actions and decisions on how people judge the fairness of procedures is relatively unexplored. Across three studies, it was indeed found that inconsistent leaders significantly influenced people's reactions (fairness judgments and self-evaluations) more negatively than those who were perceived as consistent. Moreover, and more importantly, this consistency effect was only found among those who were low in SSE. In the following paragraphs, the most important theoretical findings will be discussed in greater detail.

The present work thus suggests that procedures are not only moderated by situational factors (which are commonly examined in social justice studies; e.g. Cropanzano & Konovsky, 1995), but also by how individuals differ in their level of SSE. A limited number of studies already provide evidence that differences between individuals on a certain domain may have a moderating influence. For example, Skarlicki and Folger (1999) showed in an organizational context that individuals differing in the degree of negative affectivity and agreeableness reacted differently in terms of retaliation toward variations in unfairness. In a similar vein, the present findings demonstrate that those individuals low in SSE differed significantly in their reactions toward variations in leader's consistency, whereas those high in SSE did not. As such, these findings are in line with the only two other studies that have found a moderating effect of self-esteem on procedures (Brockner et al., 1998; Vermunt et al., 2001). However, Brockner et al. (1998) found that individuals high in general self-esteem reacted most strongly toward variations in voice, whereas Vermunt et al. (2001) showed that those low in SSE used procedural fairness judgments to a greater extent than outcome considerations in determining judgments of outcome fairness. One reason for this difference may be that the procedural measures of Vermunt et al. highlighted the relational aspects of procedures, whereas Brockner et al. focused more on the control aspect (see Experiment 5 where self-esteem was manipulated as a means of efficacy). Another reason

may be that both studies made use of different self-esteem measures. Whereas Brockner et al. (1998) used a general self-esteem measure (which was trait-based), Vermunt et al. (2001) used the same state SSE measure as in the present research. Future research may try to combine both measures to examine whether both tap into different processes. Nevertheless, the present research is important, as it is the first (to my knowledge) to experimentally demonstrate that differences in level of SSE moderate the importance of another procedure, that is, consistency. Furthermore, in line with Vermunt et al.'s similar findings, the results also seem to suggest that consistency is strongly related to relational concerns. As such, the observed moderating effect of SSE may provide further insights into the question: Why does procedural fairness matter?

Based on relational models of procedural fairness, it is suggested that fair procedures enacted by an authority in interpersonal relationships, communicate important relational information regarding one's standing and status within that relationship (Lind, 2001; Tyler & Lind, 1992; Van den Bos & Lind, 2002). As a consequence, procedural fairness is expected to influence one's sense of self-worth and emotions (Koper et al., 1993; Van den Bos, 2001). The fact that in the present research the reactions of those individuals assumed to be most sensitive about their position in the relationship with their authority, that is, those with low SSE (see Leary & Baumeister, 2000) were influenced most by the procedural information, points out how important a relational account of procedural fairness can be. More specifically, the present findings indicate that the extent to which leaders make decisions in a consistent manner exerts influence on how negative those in need for relational appreciation, i.e. those low in SSE, feel about themselves (see Study 3). This effect has not been demonstrated before. Moreover, it illustrates that procedures seem to influence self-evaluations if one's level of self-worth is supposedly related to the quality of interpersonal interactions one is involved in (see also Leary & Baumeister, 2000). However, it has to be noted that this does not mean that only relational-based processes may produce these procedure effects. Indeed, evidence exists that procedures may be described in both instrumental or non-instrumental ways (e.g. Korsgaard & Roberson, 1995; Lind et al., 1990). Future research is needed to explore further how and when relational and instrumental concerns explain people's reactions toward procedural fairness.

An important implication of these findings is that they are supportive of recent claims that more attention should be devoted to the specific relationship between the self and procedural justice (e.g. Brockner et al., 1998; Gilliland, 1994; Schroth & Shah, 2000; Van den Bos, Bruins, Wilke, & Dronkert, 1999). That is, researchers have suggested that (un)fairness of procedures may motivate people to ask themselves what those procedures actually say about themselves (i.e. with respect to their self-evaluation). For example, when treated unfairly people may initiate sense-making by wondering why they are treated in an unfair manner and whether or not this has anything to do with how they are perceived by others. Moreover, this relationship between self and procedural justice is most likely to influence people's reactions when the context is highly self-evaluative (Van den Bos et al., 1999; Experiment 3). For example, in a highly self-evaluative context (i.e. selection procedures for a job), Gilliland (1994) demonstrated that the (un)fairness of procedures influenced perceptions of self-efficacy. Therefore, based on the present findings and prior research, it appears that future procedural justice research will benefit from examining the specific role of the self in people's reactions to (un)fair procedures.

The present findings also have implications for research on self-esteem, and, more specifically, sociometer theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). Following Sociometer Theory, people's level of self-esteem is supposed to be an indicator of the extent to which one is appreciated and valued by other interaction partners. Therefore, Leary and Baumeister (2000, p. 37) argue that 'people with high self-esteem tend to believe that others are more accepting of them than people with low self-esteem', suggesting that the former, relative to the latter, will not be sensitive toward self-relevant information. This is exactly what the present findings seem to suggest. As expected, those with low self-esteem

appeared to be sensitive to the given procedural information, as was shown in their procedural fairness judgments and emotional reactions. As such, this pattern of findings is in line with the assumption that the function of self-esteem is to assess the quality of one's interactions with others.

A final finding worth mentioning is the fact that those with low SSE were particularly willing to replace an inconsistent leader. This is an interesting behavioural variable, because it indicates that people wish to end a relationship with an authority if this relationship—from the perspective of those who are in need of relational appreciation—is perceived as procedurally unfair, emphasizing the importance of a socio-emotional dimension of leadership (e.g. Bass, 1990). Furthermore, this finding corroborates earlier findings showing that people preferred to replace leaders when outcomes are allocated in unfair ways (e.g. using the equity rule when equality is the obvious decision-rule; Wit & Wilke, 1988), although this may not happen if the leader is considered to be a prototypical group representative (e.g. Platow, Hoar, Reid, Harley, & Morrison, 1997; Platow & van Knippenberg, 2001). The fact that similar results are found with respect to procedures is in line with Cropanzano and Ambrose (2001) who argued, in a recent review, that distribution rules could also be seen as procedures, and therefore may reveal similar effects. Future research may devote more attention to this issue of the interchangeability between procedures and distribution rules (see also De Cremer, 2002b).

To summarize, the present research describes an initial attempt to experimentally manipulate (for the only exception, see Van den Bos et al., 1996) a procedural fairness rule that has received little attention, that is, the consistency rule (Brockner et al., 2001). Using this type of manipulation, findings from three studies showed that leader's consistency is an important procedure that influences judgments, actions, and self-evaluations as a function of people's level of social self-esteem. In this way, it is suggested that the consistency rule can be seen as an important procedure influencing people's reactions, particularly when self-relevant information is needed in ongoing social relationships.

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